The Pagan Altar: How the Eucharist Transformed the Jewish Jesus into a Hellenistic Mystery

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Introduction: The Two Paths of Early Christianity

Christianity today is defined by the Eucharist. Believers consume bread and wine, maintaining that they receive the literal or spiritual body and blood of Jesus Christ.

This practice did not emerge from the Jewish world of Jesus of Nazareth. It represents a radical departure from First-Century Judaism.

Two competing visions shaped early Christianity:

- **The Jerusalem Church:** Led by James the Just, the brother of Jesus. They maintained strict adherence to Jewish law (Torah) and viewed Jesus as the human Messiah.
- **The Gentile Mission:** Spearheaded by Paul of Tarsus. Paul reinterpreted Jesus through the lens of Hellenistic mysticism, creating a new religion for the Greco-Roman world.

This book traces how the simple Jewish fellowship meal became a sacramental mystery ritual. It explores how Greek philosophy, Roman civic religion, and Mediterranean mystery cults transformed the historical Jesus into a dying-and-rising savior god.

Introduction EXPANDED: The Two Paths of Early Christianity

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  This book traces how the simple Jewish fellowship meal became a sacramental mystery ritual [1, 7]. It explores how Greek philosophy, Roman civic religion, and Mediterranean mystery cults transformed the historical Jesus into a dying-and-rising savior god [1, 6].

References

1. **Maccoby, Hyam.** *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*. Harper & Row, 1986.
   (Details the deep divide between the Jerusalem Church under James and the Hellenistic innovations introduced by Paul, specifically regarding the pagan origins of the Eucharist).
2. **Crossan, John Dominic.** *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
   (Examines the nature of Jesus's egalitarian open table fellowship as distinct from later sacramental, ritualistic reinterpretations).
3. **Boccaccini, Gabriele.** *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Judaism*. Eerdmans, 1998.
   (Contextualizes first-century Jewish sectarian meals, illustrating why a literal or mystical consumption of body and blood violates core Second Temple Jewish boundaries).
4. **Dunn, James D.G.** *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*. SCM Press, 2006.

(Provides a thorough analysis of the distinct theological strands, conflicts, and factions between the primitive Jewish-Christian church and Pauline communities).

5. **Eisenman, Robert.** *James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Viking Penguin, 1997.
   (An exhaustive historical investigation into James the Just, highlighting his strict commitment to the Torah and national Jewish identity over and against Pauline theology).
6. **Smith, Jonathan Z.** *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.
   (Critically evaluates how Pauline Christianity shared thematic, ritualistic, and structural elements with Greco-Roman mystery cults and Hellenistic religiosity).
7. **Schweitzer, Albert.** *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998 (Reprint).
   (Argues that the sacramental nature of Paul's theology represents a distinct break from Jewish eschatology, relying on a unique form of Christ-mysticism).

Chapter 1: James, Jesus, and the Jewish Table

To understand how the Eucharist evolved, we must first look at how the historical Jesus actually ate. Jesus was a devout Jew. His religious life revolved around Jewish dietary laws (Kashrut) and communal meals.

The Sacredness of the Jewish Table Fellowship

In first-century Judaism, sharing a meal was an act of holy fellowship (*chaburah*).

- **The Blessings:** Meals began with the *Berakhah*. The host blessed God *for* the bread and wine, not the elements themselves.
- **The Formula:** "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth."
- **The Meaning:** The food remained bread. The wine remained wine. They were signs of God’s provisions, not vehicles of divine substance.

The Absolute Prohibition of Blood

The most definitive proof against a Jewish origin for the Eucharist is the absolute biblical prohibition against consuming blood.

- **The Law:** Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:10-14, and Deuteronomy 12:23 strictly forbid tasting blood. Blood is the life force, belonging solely to God.
- **The Punishment:** Consuming blood resulted in being "cut off" from the Jewish people.
- **The Historical Reality:** A Jewish Jesus would never have commanded his Jewish disciples to drink his blood, even metaphorically. Such an instruction would have caused immediate horror and apostasy among his followers.

The Jerusalem Decree

When the early Church split over how to handle Gentile converts, the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) met to decide the rules. James the Just presided over this council.

The resulting "Apostolic Decree" commanded Gentiles to abstain from four things. Crucially, one of those was **blood** and another was **meat from strangled animals** (which retained blood).

If James and the Jerusalem Church believed Jesus instituted a ritual of drinking blood—even under the appearance of wine—this

decree would be completely nonsensical. James's theology relied on maintaining Jewish purity, entirely excluding the concept of sacramental cannibalism.

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References

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   (Details the "open table fellowship" of the historical Jesus as a social and egalitarian act, rather than a cultic or sacramental manipulation of physical substances).

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(Discusses Jesus within his historical second-temple Jewish milieu, highlighting the strict boundaries of dietary laws that governed his historical ministry).
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(Reconstructs the dietary and social realities of first-century Galilee, confirming that Jesus's actions stayed within the broader boundaries of Jewish law).

Chapter 2: Paul’s Innovation and the Hellenistic Shift

If the Eucharist did not come from Jesus or James, where did it originate? The historical answer points directly to Paul of Tarsus.

The Corinthian Problem

The earliest written account of the Last Supper is not found in the Gospels, but in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:23-26), written around 54 CE.

Paul writes: *"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you..."*

Paul does not claim he learned this ritual from Peter, James, or those who walked with Jesus. He claims he received it via a direct, mystical revelation ("from the Lord"). Paul was operating in Diaspora cities like Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth, where Greek ideas dominated daily life.

Reinterpreting the Passover

Paul took the framework of the Jewish Passover and injected it with a foreign, sacrificial theology.

- **Jewish Passover:** A historical commemoration of national liberation. The paschal lamb was a commemorative meal, not a sin offering. No one ate the lamb to achieve personal immortality.
- **Paul’s Theology:** Paul recast Jesus as the cosmic paschal lamb sacrificed for personal sin. He transformed a collective historical anniversary into an individualistic sacrament of salvation.

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   (Argues that Paul's phrasing "received from the Lord" denotes a direct mystical revelation rather than historical tradition, positioning Paul as the innovator of the eucharistic liturgy).
2. **Ehrman, Bart D.** *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*. HarperOne, 2014.
   (Traces the rapid evolution of early Christology, detailing how Paul's communities shifted away from Palestinian Jewish expectations toward a divine, sacrificial savior framework).

3. **Vermes, Geza.** *The Changing Faces of Jesus*. Penguin Books, 2001.
(Examines how the identity of Jesus as a Galilean charismatic was replaced by Paul's cosmic, sacrificial theology, reshaping traditional Jewish ideas regarding Passover and atonement).
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(The foundational text examining the systemic theological rift and distinct ideological paths between Pauline Christianity and the Jerusalem Jewish-Christian faction).
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(Explores Paul's cultural mindset as a Diaspora Jew operating in Hellenistic environments, explaining his use of mystical terminology to contextualize the gospel for Gentiles).
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(Highlights how Paul's separation from the Jerusalem Church allowed him to reshape the historical, political message of Jesus into a Hellenised cosmic religion).
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New Testament Christology. Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.
(Analyses the transition of the Christian message from its Aramaic-Jewish roots into the Greek-speaking world, highlighting Paul's pivotal role in this transformation).

Chapter 3: The Hellenic Mystery Cults and the Divine Feast

The Mediterranean world of the first century was saturated with Mystery Religions. These were secret cults promising personal salvation, mystical union with a deity, and eternal life through initiations and sacred meals. Paul's Gentile converts were intimately familiar with these traditions.

[Pagan Mystery Cults]
[Pauline Christianity]
- Dionysus / Osiris
- Jesus Christ
- Ritual Telete (Sacred Meal)
- The Holy Communion
- Becoming One with the God
- Being "In Christ"
- Promise of Immortality
- Promise of Resurrection

The Cult of Dionysus and Bacchus

Dionysus was the Greek god of wine, ritual madness, and ecstasy.

- **The Ritual:** Worshippers participated in the *omophagia*—the tearing apart and eating of raw flesh, and the drinking of wine.
- **The Theology:** By consuming the wine (the blood of the grape) and the meat, the initiate achieved *enthousiasmos* (literally, "having the god within"). They physically ingested the deity to share in his immortal nature.

The Eleusinian and Mithraic Mysteries

In the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter, initiates drank the *kykeon*, a sacred potion, to guarantee a blessed afterlife.

Similarly, the cult of Mithras—highly popular among Roman soldiers—featured a ritual meal that deeply alarmed early Christian apologists like Justin Martyr. Mithraists blessed bread and a cup of water or wine, sitting at a communal table to achieve spiritual fellowship with the sun god.

Justin Martyr famously claimed that evil demons had copied the Christian Eucharist in advance to deceive humanity. The historical reality is the reverse: Christianity adapted to the existing religious grammar of its environment.

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Comparative Framework: Mystery Cults vs. Pauline Christianity

Pagan Mystery Cults	Pauline Christianity
• Dionysus / Osiris	• Jesus Christ
• Ritual *Telete* (Sacred Meal)	• The Holy Communion
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1. **Angus, Samuel.** *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity*. University of Kensington Press, 1925 (Reprint 1967).
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   (The primary source text where Justin Martyr explicitly notes the striking similarities between the Christian Eucharist and the Mithraic ritual meal of bread and water, attributing the parallel to demonic imitation).
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   (Explores how Pauline sacramental language mirrors Hellenistic practices of consuming a deity to achieve union, a concept alien to Palestinian Judaism).
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Mithraic mysteries, emphasizing the role of sacred food and drink).

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Chapter 4: Roman Sacrificial Culture and Transubstantiation

As Christianity migrated from a persecuted sect to the state religion of the Roman Empire, it absorbed Roman legal, civic, and sacrificial frameworks. This transition laid the groundwork for the medieval doctrine of **Transubstantiation**.

Roman Sacrifice as a Legal Transaction

Roman religion (*Religio*) was pragmatic and deeply legalistic.

- **The Principle:** *Do ut des* ("I give so that you might give").
- **The Mechanism:** Altars required literal, physical sacrifices to maintain the *pax deorum* (peace with the gods).
- **The Evolution:** When the Christian Roman Empire banned pagan altars, the Christian altar took over their civic function. The Eucharist ceased to be a fellowship meal and became a literal propitiatory sacrifice offered by a specialized priesthood to appease an offended deity.

Aristotelian Philosophy and Catholic Dogma

In the Middle Ages, theologians like Thomas Aquinas used Roman law and Greek philosophy—specifically Aristotle—to explain how bread and wine could become the literal body and blood of Christ. This became the dogma of **Transubstantiation**.

Aristotle divided reality into two categories:

1. **Substance:** What a thing fundamentally *is* in its essence.
2. **Accidents:** The external, physical traits of a thing (taste, smell, color, shape). Transubstantiation claims that during the words of consecration, the *substance* of the bread and wine changes entirely into the literal *substance* of the body and blood of Jesus. However, the *accidents* (the appearance of bread and wine) remain the same.

Concept	Prior to Consecration	After Consecration
Substance (Essence)	Bread & Wine	Body & Blood of Christ
Accidents (Physical Traits)	Looks/Tastes like Bread & Wine	Looks/Tastes like Bread & Wine

This ultra-literal, metaphysical sorcery is entirely dependent on Greek philosophical categories. It would be utterly incomprehensible to first-century Palestinian

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3. **Aquinas, Thomas.** *Summa Theologiae*. Third Part, Questions 75–77. *(The primary medieval text where the doctrine of Transubstantiation is explicitly systemised using Aristotelian metaphysics of substance and accidents).*
4. **Maccoby, Hyam.** *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*. Harper & Row, 1986. *(Contrasts the mechanical, legalistic propitiatory sacrifice developed in European*

Christianity with original first-century Jewish theology).

5. **Dix, Dom Gregory.** *The Shape of the Liturgy*. Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005 (Reprint).
   (Traces the evolution of the eucharistic liturgy, documenting its transition from an early corporate fellowship meal into an elaborate sacrificial rite executed by a distinct priestly caste).
6. **Borsch, Frederick Houk.** *The Many Faces of Christ*. Seabury Press, 1979.
   (Explores how Hellenistic and European conceptual frameworks transformed Jewish holistic thinking into Greek abstract ontology).
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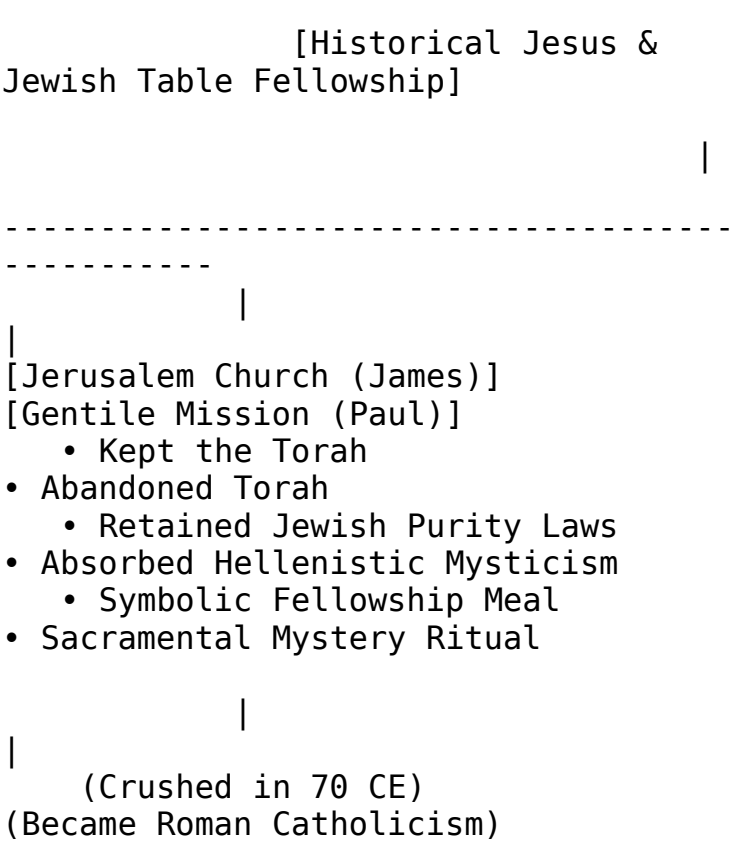
   (Analyses the baseline operations of Greco-Roman civic cults, outlining how the mechanics of sacrifice and priesthood set the structural expectations for later mainstream western Christianity).

Chapter 5: The Triumph of the Mystery

The historical trajectory is clear. The early Christian movement split into two distinct paths:



The destruction of Jerusalem by Roman legions in 70 CE effectively wiped out the Jewish faction led by James's successors. The Pauline, Gentile branch survived and flourished.

As the Church grew in Greek and Roman soil, it naturally expressed its theology using the concepts available to it. The simple, communal bread-breaking of a Jewish rabbi was recast as a Hellenistic mystery. Jesus was transformed from a Jewish apocalyptic prophet into a cosmic mystery god whose flesh and blood must be consumed for eternal salvation.

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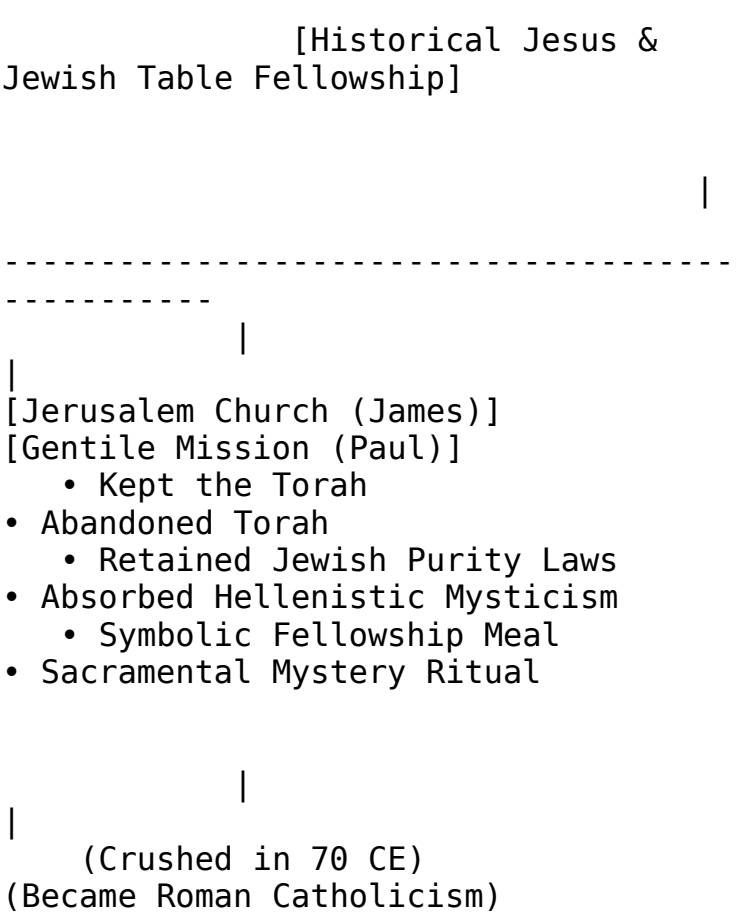

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1. **Maccoby, Hyam.** *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*. Harper & Row, 1986.
(Provides the foundational argument that the

Pauline Gentile mission systematically replaced the Torah-observant theology of the Jerusalem Church, permanently reshaping the ritual practice of the Eucharist).

2. **Eisenman, Robert.** *James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Viking Penguin, 1997.
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   (Traces the conflicts between various early Christian factions, demonstrating how the proto-orthodox, Pauline branch won the theological battle and standardized its sacramental worldview).
5. **Vermes, Geza.** *Christianity: An Introduction*. Yale University Press, 2012.

(Details the historical shift of the Christian movement away from Palestinian Jewish apocalypticism and its gradual transformation into a Hellenized mystery religion).

6. **Fredriksen, Paula.** *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*. Yale University Press, 2000. *(Explores how the sociological transition from a predominantly Jewish movement to a Gentile empire required translating Jesus into the language and expectations of Mediterranean culture).*
7. **Lüdemann, Gerd.** *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity*. Fortress Press, 1989. *(Documents the profound ideological resistance that Jewish-Christian groups maintained against Paul's law-free, sacramental gospel until they were marginalized by history).*

Epilogue: Recapturing the Jewish Table

The historical transformation of Christianity's central ritual reveals a profound cultural shift. What began as an egalitarian, Torah-compliant table fellowship (*chaburah*) in the villages of Galilee was utterly transformed. Through the mystical revelations of Paul of Tarsus, the literary framing of the late Gentile Gospels, and the assimilation of Mediterranean mystery cults, a simple Jewish meal became a sacramental mystery. By the Middle Ages, the adoption of Roman legal frameworks and Aristotelian metaphysics culminated in the doctrine of Transubstantiation—a concept completely foreign to the historical Jesus and his brother, James the Just.

When the Roman legions destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE, they did more than flatten a city; they eradicated the primary authority of the Jewish-Christian movement. With the Jerusalem Church silenced, the Pauline, Hellenized model of Christianity faced no structural rivals. Jesus the Jewish prophet was eclipsed by Christ the cosmic savior god. For nearly two millennia, western sacramental theology has remained bound to this Greco-Roman synthesis, mistaking an adapted mystery religion ritual for the original intention of its namesake. To recover

the historical reality of the primitive church, one must strip away these layers of pagan theology and return to the holistically Jewish world where the table was an altar of divine fellowship, and the food remained bread and wine.

Appendix: The Hasidic *Farbrengen* and the Recovery of true Jewish Fellowship

If the modern Christian Eucharist represents a radical departure from the historical table fellowship of Jesus, where does the authentic model of this practice survive today? The closest living sociological and theological equivalent to the first-century *chaburah* is not found in the cathedrals of Rome or Byzantium, but in the Hasidic gathering known as the ***Farbrengen***, particularly as taught and exemplified by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

The Anatomy of a *Farbrengen* vs. The Hellenized Eucharist

The *Farbrengen* is a communal gathering of Hasidim focused on Torah study, spiritual awakening, and brotherly love. When contrasted with the Greco-Roman Eucharist, the *Farbrengen* directly restores the original theological grammar of Second Temple Jewish table fellowship:

- **Elevation over Mutation:** In the Eucharist, the substance of the bread and wine must be magically destroyed or mutated into a deity to possess saving power. In a *Farbrengen*, the physical food (bread, meat) and drink (*mashke*/alcohol) remain entirely physical. They are holy because they are used as tools

to spark spiritual discourse and elevate the physical world, aligning with the Jewish concept of *Dira BeTachtonim* (making a dwelling place for God in the lower worlds).

- **The Rebbe as Teacher, Not Priest:** The Roman and Orthodox eucharistic frameworks rely on a specialized, hierarchical priest who possesses the exclusive power to manifest the deity on an altar. In Hasidism, the Rebbe is not a priest who manipulates matter through theurgic spells. The Rebbe is a spiritual guide, master, and the "collective soul" of the generation. He leads the table fellowship through the teaching of Torah and the leading of songs (*niggunim*), mirroring how Jesus historically led his disciples.
- **Communion via Community:** In the Hellenistic mystery religions and the Pauline Eucharist, salvation is individualistic—the initiate physically consumes the god to secure personal immortality. In the *Farbrengen*, communion with the Divine is achieved horizontally through absolute unity with the community (*Ahavat Yisrael*). The food and drink are shared to break down barriers between people, creating a collective vessel for the Divine Presence.
  `[Hellenized Eucharist]`
  `[Hasidic Farbrengen / Original Chaburah]`

• Elements turn into literal body/blood	• Elements remain bread and wine
• Requires an institutional priest	• Led by a spiritual master/teacher
• Goal: Individual immortality via ingestion	• Goal: Communal unity and elevation of the physical
• Rooted in Greco-Roman Mystery Cults	• Rooted in Torah and Jewish Mysticism

The Rebbe’s Corrective Vision

The Lubavitcher Rebbe continuously emphasized that the physical world is not intrinsically evil or separate from God, directly countering the Gnostic and Hellenistic dualism that infected early Christianity. By gathering at the table, sharing bread, saying blessings (*Berakhot*), and pledging *L'chaim* (To Life!), the Hasidic community demonstrates the exact template of the historical *chaburah*. It proves that the "correct" form of communion requires no pagan mythology, no sacramental cannibalism, and no violation of Biblical dietary laws. True fellowship is found when holy people sit together at a physical table, transforming an ordinary meal into a vehicle

for divine revelation through the study of Torah and the pursuit of mutual love.

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